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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 MOSCOW 000306

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TAGS: [PGOV](#) [PREL](#) [PHUM](#) [RS](#)
SUBJECT: PUTIN SIGNS NGO LEGISLATION

REF: MOSCOW 0096

Classified By: Ambassador William J. Burns. Reasons: 1.4 (B/D).

11. (C) SUMMARY: The GOR announced January 17 that President Putin signed the controversial NGO legislation on January 10.

That news was made public when a GOR newspaper that publishes such announcements printed the bill's text with an indication of the date of its signing. While Putin had defended the bill in conversations on January 16 with German Chancellor Merkel, he had not announced that he had signed it. In a January 13 conversation with FM Lavrov, the Ambassador stressed concerns about its implementation. The Embassy will continue expressing those concerns, including in the immediate future, when the GOR will presumably spell out implementing details. END SUMMARY.

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BILL SIGNED

12. (U) The lengthy uncertainty and speculation about when the controversial NGO bill would be signed (reftel) ended when Rossiskaya Gazeta, which publishes such official announcements, printed its text with an indication that President Putin had signed it on January 10. This conforms with the legal requirement that the text of any bill must be published after its signing by the president. It will go into effect ninety days after today's publication. As of midday on January 17, the Kremlin's official website does not contain information on Putin's move, although it reports on other bills the president has approved. We understand the bill as signed is identical with what the State Duma passed on third reading on December 23 and the FedCouncil passed four days later.

13. (U) Observers note that Putin did not indicate that he had signed the bill when he discussed it on January 16 with German Chancellor Merkel. He did, however, speak of the bill as if it had been approved. According to press reports, Putin said the bill would not harm foreign NGOs that are working in Russia toward their stated goals. On the contrary, Putin reportedly said, the government would support those organizations. Noting that he had asked the Council of Europe to comment on the bill, Putin said that it had done so and that all its suggestions had been taken into account when the State Duma had amended the legislation. Putin said that among the bill's main goals was to combat "non-transparent financing of domestic political activity in Russia."

14. (U) Merkel reportedly said that the discussion had included mention of many objections to the bill. She stressed that her government would work to ensure that German foundations and NGOs could carry out their work. Merkel is quoted as saying: "There were many objections to the bill. Some were taken into account. But we will watch how they will be carried out in practice." Merkel met with members of

Russian civil society following her meeting with Putin.
(Septel will address Merkel's Moscow visit.)

15. (SBU) As noted reftel, the bill will now likely go to the Justice Ministry, which will have the lead in preparing "normative regulations" laying out details of implementation.

Yuriy Dzhibladze of the Center for the Development of Democracy and Human Rights told us January 13 that this process would likely take about three months. He noted the importance of closely analyzing those regulations given that apparently small details could have a huge impact on implementation.

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LAVROV ON LEGISLATION

16. (C) The Ambassador discussed the NGO bill in a January 13 meeting with FM Lavrov. The Ambassador underscored our concerns about the bill, including about its implementation. Lavrov said he understood those concerns; the MFA had helped improve the original draft bill to accommodate some concerns, especially related to foreign foundations, and it would be important to keep a close eye on implementation.

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NGO REACTIONS

17. (C) NGO activists with whom we spoke said they were not surprised that Putin had approved the bill. Indeed, some said they had believed Putin had signed it even before the new year. Our contacts were not hopeful about the bill's consequences. Some, such as long-time human rights activist Lev Ponomarev, told us Putin would pay little heed to our concerns and implement the bill harshly, although he

MOSCOW 00000306 002 OF 002

acknowledged that might not occur immediately. Others felt that it was essential for the West, including the U.S., to keep stressing our concerns in order to have some bearing on implementing legislation and, over the longer term, on how the legislation is carried out. Visiting A/S Lowenkron and DAS Kramer will join the Ambassador for a discussion of this issue with NGO activists in a January 17 meeting.

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COMMENT

18. (C) Putin's signing of the bill came as no surprise, but the way it was announced is curious. Although any lingering questions about whether Putin would sign have now been resolved, how it will be implemented remains an issue, presumably to be addressed initially in preparation of "normative regulations." For this reason, we will continue stressing our concerns about the bill's implementation, and the visit of A/S Lowenkron and DAS Kramer offers an opportunity to reinforce that message.

BURNS